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BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: DUALISM AS DESPOTISM IN THE FICTION OF SALMAN RUSHDIE

BY M. KEITH BOOKER

One of the most telling and significant passages in all of the complex fiction of Salman Rushdie occurs in his discussion of the game of "Snakes and Ladders" in *Midnight's Children*. For one thing, this passage illustrates Rushdie's ability to evoke memories of childhood with a tenderness and nostalgia that rivals a Proust or a Nabokov. For another, it shows the way in which he so effectively employs images from popular culture in the construction of his highly literary fictions, since "Snakes and Ladders" itself is of central thematic importance to the structure of *Midnight's Children*. In this simple children's game, alternatives are clear and unproblematic. Ladders lead upward and are good; snakes send one sliding downward and are bad. But Rushdie's narrator, the harried Saleem Sinai, notes the way in which this apparently innocent game figures a much less innocent tendency toward dualistic thinking: "implicit in the game is the unchanging twoness of things, the duality of up against down, good against evil . . . metaphorically, all conceivable oppositions, Alpha against Omega, father against mother."¹ In the world of Rushdie, however, things are never quite so simple, and Sinai finds that such neat polar oppositions inevitably fall apart: "but I found, very early in my life, that the game lacked one crucial dimension, that of ambiguity . . . it is also possible to slither down a ladder and climb to triumph on the venom of a snake"(167).

This crucial element of ambiguity and multiple possibilities, emphasized as it is by the self-contradictory Shandean narrative excesses of Sinai himself, becomes in fact a central thematic element of the entire book. But, like Tristram Shandy, Sinai is actually quite charming in his contradictoriness, and, as Mario Couto points out, his inconsistency "enhances one of the novel's most engaging qualities—its pervasive tone of uncertainty."² In the case of *Midnight's Children* this theme is linked in an obvious way to the use of *Tristram Shandy* as a narrative model, but in fact all of Rushdie's narrators operate much in the same way.³ For example, the narrator of *Shame* explains his ability to be unbothered by apparent contradiction: "The inconsistency doesn't matter; I myself manage to

hold large numbers of wholly irreconcilable views simultaneously, without the least difficulty. I do not think others are less versatile.”⁴

Certainly it would be an egregiously naive interpretive error to mistake statements made by any of Rushdie’s rhetorically complex narrators for the opinions of Rushdie himself, though one might have a difficult time explaining that fact to certain Islamic fundamentalist elements. Still, this Nietzschean-Whitmanesque mode of acceptance of contradiction might serve not only as a central theme of *Shame*, but of all of Rushdie’s fiction. That fiction consistently embraces contradiction, privileging the plural over the singular, the polyphonic over the monologic. One of the clearest ways in which it does so is through the careful construction of dual oppositions, like the snakes and ladders of Sinai’s children’s game, only to deconstruct those oppositions by demonstrating that the apparent polar opposites are in fact interchangeable and mutually interdependent.

The most obvious way in which Rushdie launches his attack on dual thinking is through the use of paired characters. All of the most important characters tend to be shadowed by doubles in Rushdie’s texts. A good example of such pairings involves Saleem Sinai and his alter ego, Shiva. Sinai is ostensibly the hero of the book, even if he is a hero in a decidedly ironic way. The sinister Shiva, on the other hand, is presented as the very embodiment of evil. These two opposing characters were both ominously born at the stroke of midnight on India’s day of independence from British rule, one to the well-to-do Sinai family, one to a family of paupers. But the two infants were in fact switched at birth by Mary Pereira, the Sinai family *ayah* who sought to impress her Marxist boyfriend with this bit of prince-and-the-pauper subversion of social hierarchies. In a sense, then, Sinai is “really” Shiva, and Shiva is “really” Sinai, so that the polar opposition is severely problematized.

Rushdie continues this motif of paired characters in *Shame*, though in a more complex way, because in *Shame* there is no single major character on whom to focus. As a result there are a number of important pairings in this later novel, including Iskander Harappa and Raza Hyder, Harappa and Maulana Dawood, and Rani Harappa and Bilquis Hyder. In *The Satanic Verses*, however, the text again centers on a single pairing, in the persons of Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, though Rushdie builds on that central pairing in an extremely complex and sophisticated way: “For are they not conjoined opposites, these two, each man the other’s shadow?”⁵

The use of such character pairings is quite common in modern literature, of course, and one immediately thinks of the *doppelgänger* of Nabokov, or of pairings such as Stephen-Bloom or Shem-Shaun in Joyce. However, it is important to realize that Rushdie (like Joyce) goes much deeper in his deconstruction of oppositions than the questioning of apparent differences between separate characters, delving into the interior of the individual psyche itself.

In John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the narrator suggests that a tendency toward dualistic thinking was the central characteristic of Victorian England, which makes "the best guide-book to the age very possibly *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*."⁶ Indeed, Stevenson's classic tale of the duality of human nature stands as a strong literary paradigm of dualisms in general. It is appropriate, then, that Rushdie's *Shame* (a text that deals so extensively with the theme of duality) should adopt *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (along with its fairy-tale counterpart, *Beauty and the Beast*) as a central inter-textual model. Musing on the possibility that a Beast may in fact lurk inside the Beauty who is Naveed "Good News" Hyder, Rushdie's narrator imagines a nameless "Great Poet" explaining the impossibility of such a conjunction:

As Mr. Stevenson has shown in his *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, such saint-and-monster conjunctions are conceivable in the case of men; alas! such is our nature. But the whole essence of Woman denies such a possibility. (S, 173)

This statement, of course, is made with typical Rushdie irony. A central plot line of *Shame* involves the literal transformation of Naveed's beautiful sister Sufiya Zenobia Hyder into a beast who hypnotizes and seduces young men, then rips off their heads with superhuman strength. Rushdie carefully indicates the parallel between Sufiya Zenobia and Stevenson's hero, referring to her marriage to Omar Khayyam Shakil as "her transformation from Miss Hyder into Mrs. Shakil" (S, 188). Names are usually significant in Rushdie, even if ironically so—Omar Khayyam, for example, never writes a line of poetry. Here, the phonetic parallel between Jekyll-Hyde and Shakil-Hyder is quite obvious, though the pairing is (not insignificantly) reversed—Sufiya Zenobia is a beauty as Hyder, a beast as Shakil.⁷

The kinds of human-beast transformations undergone by Sufiya Zenobia Hyder represent a favorite Rushdie motif. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai is at one point used as a "man-dog," em-

ployed by the Pakistani “Canine Unit for Tracking and Intelligence” to sniff out enemies with his redoubtable nose.⁸ *The Satanic Verses* actually features a number of such human-beast hybrids, the most striking of which is the mysterious metamorphosis of Chamcha into a devilish goatlike beast. And when the transformed Chamcha participates in a mass escape from the hospital where he is confined, he enters a nightmare vision inhabited by all sorts of similarly metamorphosed creatures: “Chamcha glimpsed beings he could never have imagined, men and women who were also partially plants, or giant insects, or even, on occasion, built partly of brick or stone; there were men with rhinoceros horns instead of noses and women with necks as long as any giraffe” (SV, 171). Bizarre as they may seem, these kinds of transformations are quite central to the Menippean tradition to which Rushdie is such a clear heir. As Mikhail Bakhtin notes, “the folktale image of man—throughout the extraordinary variety of folkloric narratives—always orders itself around the motifs of *transformation* and *identity*.”⁹ The classic work of Menippean human-animal metamorphosis is Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*, and the transformation of Chamcha into a goatlike beast parallels the transformation of Apuleius’s Lucius into an ass in a number of important ways. Like Chamcha, Lucius undergoes considerable hardship and severe mistreatment while in this animal state, but later regains his humanity. Indeed, Rushdie acknowledges his debt to his great Menippean predecessor for this motif by having Muhammad Sufyan quote from Apuleius upon seeing the transformed Chamcha for the first time (SV, 243).

Bakhtin notes that such transformations allow the representation in a short-hand form of the development and change of the individual as he goes through life: “Metamorphosis serves as the basis for a method of portraying the whole of an individual’s life in its more important moments of *crisis*: for showing *how an individual becomes other than what he was*.”¹⁰ Thus, such metamorphoses powerfully question the view of the self as a stable, self-contained entity by showing the drastic changes that the self can undergo in the course of life.¹¹ The ability of the self to be transformed into something that was formerly alien to itself interrogates the boundary between self and other, challenging the validity of even that fundamental duality.¹²

In Rushdie, the boundary between self and other is always problematic. His characters tend to be complex, multiple, and highly variable, and he emphasizes the complexity of identity in numer-

ous ways. Thus Saleem Sinai explains the difficulty of relating his life in any simple way by the fact that he, like Whitman, contains multitudes:

I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the whole lot as well. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me. (MC, 4)

In *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie again employs this image of jostling multiple selves, this time enhanced by one of his many allusions to popular culture:

O, the conflicting selves jostling and joggling within these bags of skin. No wonder we are unable to remain focused on anything for very long; no wonder we invent remote-control channel-hopping devices. If we turned these instruments upon ourselves we'd discover more channels than a cable or satellite mogul ever dreamed of. (SV, 519)

Moreover, he even states this multiplicity clearly in terms of a deconstruction of the opposition between self and other:

O eternal opposition of inside and outside! Because a human being, inside himself, is anything but a whole, anything but homogeneous; all kinds of everywhichthing are jumbled up inside him and he is one person one minute and another the next. (MC, 283)

This instability of identity, we are told, occurs because “things—even people—have a way of leaking into each other . . . like flavours when you cook” (MC, 38). Such a mixing of identities occurs in a particularly explicit way in *Shame* during the gestation of Omar Khayyam Shakil. One of three sisters is bearing him (we never learn the identity of the father), but the others sisters are so close that they share the experience with her, helping her to bear the stigma of unwed pregnancy: “twin phantom pregnancies accompanied the real one; while the simultaneity of their behaviour suggests the operation of some form of communal mind” (13). The communal nature of the identity of these three sisters is so strong, in fact, that no one can tell the real pregnancy from the phantom ones, and neither the reader nor Omar Khayyam ever learns which of the three sisters is his true biological mother. And years later, when the sisters begin to argue over Omar Khayyam’s fateful birthday wish to be allowed to leave their barricaded home and enter the outside world for the first time, they discover that such arguments are made

difficult because even *they* have reached the point where they cannot tell themselves apart:

They had been indistinguishable too long to retain any exact sense of their former selves . . . and of course this confused separation of personalities carried with it the implication that they were still not genuinely discrete. (S, 36)

Finally, in *The Satanic Verses*, all identities are radically unstable, with most of the characters being shown to bear artificially-created identities that they themselves have largely made up: "Fictions were walking around wherever he went, Gibreel reflected, fictions masquerading as real human beings" (SV, 192). This artificiality of identity is particularly strong in the case of Chamcha, who has made up his name, changed his voice, even changed his face in order to try to fit in better in Britain.¹³ As a result, his identity is hopelessly multiple, as emphasized by his professional role as the "Man of a Thousand Voices and a Voice": "Once, in a radio play for thirty-seven voices, he interpreted every single part under a variety of pseudonyms and nobody ever worked it out" (SV, 60). Of course, as a result of such artificiality, his identity is also highly changeable: "When he was young . . . each phase of his life, each self he tried on, had seemed reassuringly temporary. Its imperfections didn't matter, because he could easily replace one moment by the next, one Saladin by another" (SV, 63). Later, the narrator suggests that the fundamental difference between Chamcha and Gibreel may in fact be that Chamcha undergoes his various changes in identity willingly, but that Gibreel seeks (unsuccessfully) to maintain his "true" self. But of course in Rushdie there is no "true" self, and this dual opposition is fated to break down:

This sounds, does it not, dangerously like an intentionalist fallacy?—Such distinctions, resting as they must on an idea of the self as being (ideally) homogeneous, non-hybrid, "pure,"—an utterly fantastic notion!—cannot, must not, suffice. (SV, 427)

One of the most vivid representations of this theme of unstable identity involves Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children*, who is physically (or at least so he believes) cracking and fragmenting into pieces. Saleem also serves as a particularly apt figure of the instability of identity because he is literally not himself. Secretly switched at birth with the infant who grows up to become the sinister Major Shiva, he is brought up by parents who are not his own. Moreover, his parentage is doubly problematic, since his real

biological father is the Englishman William Methwold, not the husband of his biological mother. Clearly, to Rushdie (as to Joyce's Stephen Dedalus) paternity is a legal fiction. Rushdie even expands this principle to make maternity a legal fiction.

Questionable parentage is one of the central ways in which Rushdie calls the illusion of identity into question. In *Shame* we know the identity of neither of Omar Khayyam's parents. Meanwhile, both Iskander Harappa and Naveed Hyder are revealed to be of illegitimate parentage, and this theme is most strikingly emphasized in the scene in the women's dormitory where the husbands enact conjugal visits *en masse* under a cover of darkness so absolute that proper pairing is highly problematic. As Rani tells Bilquis:

who would know if her real husband had come to her? And who could complain? I tell you, Billoo, these married men and ladies are having a pretty good time in this joint family set-up. I swear, maybe uncles with nieces, brothers with their brothers' wives, we'll never know who the children's daddies really are! (S, 75)

But if the very idea of a stable unified self is revealed by Rushdie to be a fiction, then the Romantic notion of the self as a basis of authority or source of truth must be a fiction as well. This attack on the authority of the individual in Rushdie is particularly centered in the persons of his narrators, who are extremely unreliable, being not only inconsistent and contradictory, but oftentimes downright mendacious. Saleem Sinai closely ties his narrative to events in actual Indian history, yet gets dates wrong, confuses causes with effects, and fabricates information when he has no facts. He even invents entire episodes, such as the death of Shiva, though he later confesses to his invention:

To tell the truth, I lied about Shiva's death. My first out-and-out lie—although my presentation of the Emergency in the guise of a six-hundred-and-thirty-five-day-long midnight was perhaps excessively romantic, and certainly contradicted by the available meteorological data. (MC, 529)

In this passage, Saleem admits a lie, claims it was his only one, then immediately admits (though more obliquely) a second lie. The net result is an evocation of the liar paradox, and the reader finds it impossible to reach any satisfactory conclusion as to what in the text is true and what is false. Moreover, by tying his text so closely to history, Rushdie suggests that the authority of all of our representations of the past may be somewhat questionable. Sinai explains

his lie about Shiva in such a way that has ominous implications concerning the construction of history in general: "I fell victim to the temptation of every autobiographer, to the illusion that since the past exists only in one's memories and the words which strive vainly to encapsulate them, it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred" (MC, 529).

The authority of Sinai's narrative is further undermined by the way in which he himself calls attention to flaws in his own narrative. Admitting that he has given the wrong date for the assassination of Gandhi, Sinai then muses on the implications of this error for the rest of his narrative, again with a reference to the authority of history:

Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything—to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role? Today, in my confusion, I can't judge. I'll have to leave it to others. (MC, 198)

Rushdie continues his questioning of the authority of both narrative and history in his later novels as well. In *Shame* the intrusive narrator repeatedly reminds us of the fictionality of his story, emphasizing that fictionality with a variety of fantastic elements, and yet tying it closely to the actual history of Pakistan as well. For example, as Raza Hyder plots the overthrow of Iskander Harappa, the narrator steps in:

Well, well, I mustn't forget I'm only telling a fairy-story. My dictator will be toppled by goblinish, faery means. "Makes it pretty easy for you," is the obvious criticism; and I agree, I agree. But add, even if it does sound a little peevish: "You try and get rid of a dictator some time." (S, 284)

In addition, the self-conscious fictionality of the narrative is directly linked to the artificiality of our constructions of history. This connection is particularly reinforced by the Pakistani setting, since Pakistan itself is an artificially created country that came into existence only with the Partition that occurred with India's independence from Britain. As a result, Pakistan is a country whose history must be fabricated from scratch:

To build Pakistan it was necessary to cover up Indian history, to deny that Indian centuries lay just beneath the surface of Pakistani Standard Time. The past was rewritten; there was nothing else to be done. (S, 91)

This phenomenon of rewriting is one that occurs again and again in Rushdie's fiction: we are given an account of events, then that account is retracted and we are given an alternative, contradictory account. The reader thus finds herself very much in the position of *Shame's* Raza Hyder, who, having assumed the presidency of Rushdie's mythical version of Pakistan, is haunted by opposing voices. In his right ear, he hears the voice of the dead Muslim religious fanatic Maulana Dawood; in his left, the voice of Harappa, Hyder's deposed predecessor: "God on his right shoulder, the Devil on his left" (S, 263). Among other things, this motif evokes the well-known cartoon image in which the central character is torn between the contradictory advice of a winged angel on the one hand and pitchfork-bearing devil on the other. In Rushdie, however, such an evocation is not surprising—he is probably rivalled only by Thomas Pynchon as a contemporary poet of cartoons, comic books, and commercials. There is clearly a carnivalesque aspect to this juxtaposition of cartoon imagery with serious political and religious issues, a suggestion that the way we typically deal with those serious issues may not be as far removed from the silliness of cartoons as we would like to believe. Moreover, the Harappa-Dawood dichotomy shows that even the distinction between God and the Devil is not a pure-and-simple one. In *Shame* we find that Harappa commits a number of atrocities, but definitely has a good side as well. Meanwhile, the holy man Dawood is a cruel and sinister (if also patently ridiculous) figure.

Of all the dual oppositions that are called into question by Rushdie's fiction, this central one between God and the Devil may be the most powerful and effective, as the recent violent reaction of Islamic fundamentalists to *The Satanic Verses* strikingly demonstrates. *Verses* again features a dualistic opposition between paired major characters, in the figures of Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, but this opposition moves to a decidedly theological plane as Gibreel spends much of the book in the throes of a transformation (maybe) into his namesake the archangel, while Chamcha is being transformed (maybe) into a goatish devil. Amidst the postmodern ontological confusion of the book, however, it is impossible to develop any satisfactorily stable understanding of the exact meaning and status of these problematic transformations. Moreover, the "devil" Saladin is treated more sympathetically and humanly than is the "angel" Gibreel, though it is perhaps Saladin (whose intentional subversion of the relationship between Gibreel

and Alleluia Cone leads to the deaths of both lovers) who commits the most devilish act in the book. In short, it is ultimately impossible to decide who is the “good guy” and who is the “bad guy.” Such oppositions simply do not apply in Rushdie’s world.

The action of *The Satanic Verses* occurs on a number of different ontological levels, and the angel-devil dichotomy represented by Gibreel and Saladin is reproduced in a number of ways throughout the book. Even the prophet Muhammad (here, Mahound) seems unable to tell angels from devils. He ascends Mount Cone and receives, presumably from the archangel Gibreel, “permission” to accept the female deities of the city of Jahilia as secondary gods in order to facilitate the conversion of the people of the city to Islam. He recites this revelation in verse to the people of Jahilia, but then later receives a second revelation from Gibreel telling him that the first had been a trick on the part of Satan. Therefore, he is forced to issue a palinode retracting those first *Satanic* verses. But this retraction, like all palinodes, cannot fully erase the earlier verses, though it may place them “under erasure.” In a sense, the retraction merely re-activates the carnivalesque energies of those earlier verses.¹⁴

Of course, the very use of the name “Mahound” participates in this confusion. Again, names in Rushdie’s fiction are charged with significance. The name “Mahound,” like so much in Rushdie, was apparently derived from the Western literary tradition. “Mahound” appears in various guises both in medieval mystery plays and in Spenser, but always as a sort of diabolic figure. To make matters more complicated, the narrator suggests that the prophet himself has chosen to use this diabolic name as a means of disarming his opponents:

Here he is neither Mahomet nor Moehammered; has adopted, instead, the demon-tag the farangis hung around his neck. To turn insults into strengths, whigs, Tories, Blacks all chose to wear with pride the names they were given in scorn; likewise, our mountain-climbing, prophet-motivated solitary is to be the medieval baby-frightener, the Devil’s synonym: Mahound. (SV, 93)

Thus, the use of this name for the prophet Muhammad emphasizes the indistinguishability of the divine and the diabolic in Rushdie’s latest book.¹⁵

All of this is complicated by the fact that the reader shares in Mahound’s confusion—we, too, cannot tell God from Devil,

Gibreel from Satan (who, after all, is a former archangel himself). In fact, even as Mahound issues his palinode, that palinode is itself subverted by the text:

Gibreel, hovering-watching from his highest camera angle, knows one small detail, just one tiny thing that's a bit of a problem here, namely that *it was me both times, baba, me first and second also me*. From my mouth, both the statement and the repudiation, verses and converses, universes and reverses, the whole thing, and we all know how my mouth got worked. (SV, 123)

This statement not only illustrates Rushdie's frequent and effective use of film imagery and terminology (again, *à la* Pynchon), but also effects a deconstruction and mutual implication of oppositions that would do Derrida proud. Angel and devil here are not opposites at all, but one and the same. Moreover, Gibreel's speech points to the way in which the Satanic verses recited by Mahound serve as an internal duplication of Rushdie's text as a whole. That text works constantly in a mode of statement and retraction. In the very beginning of the book, we are presented with the spectacle of Chamcha and Farishta conversing and singing as they fall from an aircraft that has exploded at high altitude:

Let's face it: it was impossible for them to have heard one another, much less conversed and also competed thus in song. Accelerating towards the planet, atmosphere roaring around them, how could they? But let's face this, too: they did. (SV, 6)

Or, as we are repeatedly reminded throughout the book, "*it was and it was not so*, as the old stories used to say, *it happened and it never did*" (SV, 35).

This palinodic mode of narration (reminiscent of Samuel Beckett) serves to heighten the confusion of the reader. Faced with the choice between so and not so, real and not real, the reader is thwarted in his efforts to reach a comfortable solution. Such either-or, yes-no choices are constantly subverted within Rushdie's overall assault on polar logic. This manipulative mode of narration is another Rushdie trademark—his work tends to feature unreliable, intrusive narrators who openly break the frame of the fiction to reveal the processes of composition, disturbing any attempts at a naturalistic recuperation of those fictions, even though the bulk of the narration may proceed in a largely naturalistic mode. Thus, in *The Satanic Verses*, we do indeed know how Gibreel's "mouth got

worked.” Like everything in Rushdie’s fiction, it got worked by the narrator. In *Verses* the narrator is less overtly manipulative and intrusive than in *Midnight’s Children* (where the narrator is also the main character) or *Shame* (where the narrator continually reminds us that we are reading a fiction that he made up). However, he is still an important figure, always pulling the strings, and guessing the identity of the narrator is one of the central puzzles that the reader attempts to solve in negotiating the book.

Very early on (on the second page of the book), the narrator challenges us to guess his identity: “Who am I?” he asks. “Who else is there?” he responds (SV, 4). Soon afterward, he repeats this same question, after presenting the song of Farishta while falling through the sky: “Of what type—angelic, satanic—was Farishta’s song? Who am I?” (10). But in *The Satanic Verses* it is never possible to reach a comfortable distinction between angelic and satanic, and the narrator here implicates his own identity in this same unanswerable question. Like Mahound, the reader of Rushdie’s book cannot tell if the words she receives are of divine or of diabolic origin.

There are many indications in the book that the narrator is, in fact, Satan. For one thing, the title itself points in that direction. We also have specific hints: “I know; devil talk. Shaitan interrupting Gibreel. Me?” (SV, 93). Later, the narrator compares his own fall to that of Chamcha and Farishta: “You think *they* fell a long way? In the matter of tumbles, I yield pride of place to no personage, whether mortal or im-” (133). From such passages, the narrator’s Satanic identity seems quite clear. And yet, later in the book Gibreel sees a vision of God Himself, though it is a vision of a rather unimpressive, bearded, balding God with the appearance of a “myopic scrivener,” who curiously seems to look a lot like Rushdie. We find, though, that this vision is the narrator. In *The Satanic Verses* God and Satan are indistinguishable, irrevocably intertwined, and the narrator himself does nothing to clear up the confusion: “I’m saying nothing. Don’t ask me to clear things up one way or the other; the time of revelations is long gone” (SV, 408).

Clearly, Rushdie’s attacks on the authority of texts and his attacks on the authority of religion are closely related, as well they might be—religions commonly base their authority on central texts. It is not surprising, then, that one of Rushdie’s central assaults on textual authority has as its target the Koran, that central authoritative text of Islam. For one thing, the Koran was supposedly dictated to

Muhammad by Gibreel, but we already know that Mahound has difficulty distinguishing Gibreel from Satan. If he mistakenly accepted Satanic verses once, how do we know that he won't do it again? Moreover, Mahound in turn dictates the revelations of scripture to his scribe, called (appropriately enough) Salman. But Salman, concerned over Mahound's patriarchal insistence on the submissiveness of women, begins to wonder if the prophet has his own less-than-pure motives for this insistence. So he decides to put Mahound to the test, altering the dictation slightly, only to discover that Mahound can't tell the difference:

Here's the point: Mahound did not notice the alterations. So there I was, actually writing the Book, or rewriting, anyway, polluting the word of God with my own profane language. But, good heavens, if my poor words could not be distinguished from the Revelation by God's own Messenger, then what did that mean? (SV, 367)

Or, as Salman later states, "It's his Word against mine" (SV, 368).¹⁶ By challenging the authority of that ultimate monologic word, the Word of God, Rushdie (like Bakhtin) emphasizes the inherent dialogic power of words. No word can have unquestionable authority, because all words inherently contain the potential echoes of responses from opposing voices. This is not, however, to say that language cannot be used in the service of despotism: clearly, it can. In *Shame* Rushdie's narrator specifically links Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan to political oppression, and especially to the oppressive potential of official language:

So-called Islamic "fundamentalism" does not spring, in Pakistan, from the people. It is imposed on them from above. Autocratic regimes find it useful to espouse the rhetoric of faith, because people respect that language, are reluctant to oppose it. This is how religions shore up dictators; by encircling them with words of power. (S, 278)

But if language can be used in the interest of oppression, it can also be used to oppose that oppression. Against the oppressive authoritarian language of the dictators Rushdie opposes his own language of freedom and multiplicity. Thus, in an article published in the *New York Review of Books*, Rushdie notes that the uproar over *The Satanic Verses* is "a clash of languages."¹⁷

Because of the inherent dialogic potential of language itself, the seemingly clear linguistic opposition between the sacred and the

profane that is figured in the contest between Salman and Mahound is in Rushdie not so simple after all. Moreover, by questioning the authority of such seemingly truth-based texts as history and the Koran, Rushdie even problematizes so simple an opposition as that between the true and the false, the real and the not-real. The difficulty of this distinction is highlighted by the way in which Rushdie's self-consciously literary fiction engages in a direct and intense dialogue with the social and political issues of the real world. Whether it be political oppression in Pakistan or religious fanaticism in Iran, the targets of Rushdie's anti-authoritarian satire are not only modes of philosophical speculation, but also living, breathing autocrats. *Shame*, for example, unashamedly depicts the tumultuous history of Pakistan, from its formation in 1947 up to the time of the writing of the book, while at the same time continually proclaiming its own fictionality. The narrator explains:

The country in this story is Pakistan, or not quite. There are two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space, or almost the same space. My story, my fictional country exist, like myself, at a slight angle to reality. (S, 23–4)

This theme of two contradictory realities occupying the same space is a favorite one in Rushdie's fiction. Much of the premise of *Grimus*, for example, involves a science-fiction-style speculation on the existence of alternate dimensions within the same space. In *Shame* he uses this same idea to describe the duality of Sufiya Zenobia Hyder, noting that "the edges of Sufiya Zenobia were beginning to become uncertain, as if there were two beings occupying the same air-space, competing for it, two entities of identical shape but of tragically opposed nature" (S, 259). But if two "tragically opposed" identities, two incompatible and contradictory alternative realities, can occupy the same space, then clearly the very notions of "identity" and "reality" are called into question. The narrator of *Shame*, realizing the potential volatility of the materiality with which he is dealing, expresses his gratitude that he is not writing a realistic novel. As a result, he will not have to mention certain controversial real-world issues, which he then promptly lists. Then he notes what a good thing it is that he does not have to include this material (which he has just included) in his book:

By now, if I had been writing a book of this nature, it would have done me no good to protest that I was writing universally, not only about Pakistan. The book would have been banned,

dumped in the rubbish bin, burned. All that effort for nothing! Realism can break a writer's heart.

Fortunately, however, I am only telling a sort of modern fairy-tale, so that's all right; nobody need get upset, or take anything I say too seriously. No drastic action need be taken, either. (S, 72)

The ironic humor of this passage is obvious in the context of the book, but in light of the recent "drastic action" taken by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini in response to *The Satanic Verses*, this passage takes on a rather chilling quality.¹⁸ This action, in addition to providing a dramatic instantiation of Rushdie's questioning of the boundaries between fact and fiction, also illustrates in a spectacular way why Islam so often surfaces in Rushdie's fiction as a symbol of monological thought. Time and again, Rushdie emphasizes the fact that Islam is the religion of one God, a monotheism that forms a particularly striking symbol in the context of heteroglossic, polytheistic India, "a country whose population of deities rivalled the numbers of its people" (MC, 371). As recent reactions to Rushdie's work so vividly demonstrate, it is characteristic of certain fanatical devotees of Islamic fundamentalism to be totally intolerant of all alternative modes of thought. This intolerance of otherness amounts to a dual opposition between self and other of the type that Rushdie relentlessly challenges in his fiction. For example, the narrator of *The Satanic Verses* indicates that such oppositions are related to the tendency to see God and the Devil as two separate and opposing forces rather than as related parts of the same force, then presents textual evidence to argue that such a separation has no basis in older religious texts: "This notion of separation of functions, light versus dark, evil versus good, may be straightforward enough in Islam . . . but go back a bit and you see that it's a pretty recent fabrication" (SV, 323). Still, it is important to recognize that Rushdie's enemy is not Islam itself, but dogmatism in general (read "oppression"), just as Nietzsche opposed the dogmatism of Christianity more than any particular tenets of the Christian religion. Indeed, Rushdie's thought seems to resemble that of Nietzsche in many key ways.¹⁹ But Rushdie's deconstruction of polar oppositions as a means of challenging monological authority has a number of parallels in modern critical discourse. From Nietzsche's transvaluation of values to the dialogics of Bakhtin to the deconstructive project of Jacques Derrida, a number of modern thinkers have argued that the dualistic thinking so central to the history of Western civilization has tended inevitably toward the establishment of hi-

erarchies—one term in a pair is privileged over the other so that what is “good” becomes defined from its difference from what is “bad.” Dualistic thinking thus allows complex issues to be reduced to questions of black-and-white, good-and-bad. It allows the identification of the opposition as the Other, as evil, and provides a justification for the violent oppression of that opposition.

In *Shame* Rushdie demonstrates that this tendency toward hierarchical dualisms is in fact not restricted to the West. One of the most striking and important effects of his fiction in general is the way in which it problematizes the popular adjective “Western” that has come to be associated (generally in a pejorative sense) with so many political, philosophical, and historical concepts in recent years. But that is as it should be—in Rushdie, simple dual oppositions such as East vs. West are never to be trusted. One of the ways in which he breaks down this distinction in *Shame* is through his use of the French revolution as an intertext for the various coups and other incidences of political violence in modern-day Pakistan. Rushdie evokes the play *Danton's Death*, which depicts the apparently polar opposition between the French revolutionary figures Danton and Robespierre, linking that opposition to an epicureanism-puritanism dialectic model of history. But then, in exploring the sympathies of the play's audience with these two figures, he discovers that the opposition is not a simple one at all: “The people are not only like Robespierre. They, we, are Danton, too. We are Robeston and Danpierre” (S, 267). Further, he uses this insight (and Joycean mixing of names) to problematize a similar political opposition in *Shame* itself: “Iskander Harappa was not just Danton; Raza Hyder wasn't Robespierre pure-and-simple” (S, 267).

But of course nothing is ever “pure-and-simple” in Rushdie's fiction, and the complex multiplicity of his vision acts to link his work not only with the line of modern philosophy that runs from Nietzsche to Derrida, but also to the carnivalesque Menippean literary tradition within which he writes. Within this tradition, Rushdie's clear predecessors are authors such as Rabelais, Swift, and Sterne, while his modern-day company includes such members as Joyce, Pynchon, and Günter Grass.²⁰ Central to the work of all of these writers (and to Menippean satire in general) is a questioning of traditional authority, and particularly of traditional forms of logic, forms that depend greatly on dualistic oppositions (especially the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction) for their structure.

Julia Kristeva outlines this philosophical aspect of Menippean satire (and its modern-day heir, the “polyphonic novel”), noting that “Menippean discourse develops in times of opposition against Aristotelianism, and writers of polyphonic novels seem to disapprove of the very structures of official thought founded on formal logic.”²¹ This rejection of Aristotelianism leads, according to Kristeva, to the rejection of a whole panoply of related concepts, so that the notions of “identity, substance, causality and definition are transgressed so that others may be adopted: analogy, relation, opposition, and therefore dialogism and Menippean ambivalence” (86). But to Kristeva there is more at stake than abstract ideas in the philosophical subversion inherent in the polyphonic novel. It is characteristic of Menippean satire to be invested with political force, to be a satire of something, and literary works in the Menippean tradition tend to be intensely involved with the socio-historical moment in which they are produced. “Disputing laws of language based on the 0-1 interval, the carnival challenges God, authority and social law; in so far as it is dialogical, it is rebellious” (79).

The challenge to God that Kristeva mentions here particularly emphasizes her contention that the subversive force of the modern polyphonic novel differs from that of its Menippean forerunners in one important way:

In the Middle Ages, Menippean tendencies were held in check by the authority of the religious text; in the bourgeois era, they were contained by the absolutism of individuals and things. Only modernity—when freed of “God”—releases the Menippean force of the novel. (85)

To Kristeva, then, it is precisely the loss of monologic authority associated with the Nietzschean death of God that energizes the modern polyphonic text. In this sense, Rushdie’s work is paradigmatic of the genre as Kristeva defines it. Not only is his work intensely involved with its real-world context, but that involvement quite often takes the specific form of an exploration of alternatives to the concept of theological authority.

Rushdie is, however, not an anti-religious writer.²² Like Nietzsche before him, he rejects religious dogmatism while at the same time recognizing that human beings have a fundamental need for beliefs and values. There is a character (Aadam Aziz) in *Mid-*

night's Children who, having lost his religious faith, experiences the sensation of a hole at the heart of his very self. Rushdie himself admits that he, too, has suffered such an experience of loss: "Unable to accept the unarguable absolutes of religion, I have tried to fill up the hole with literature."²³ Rushdie's fiction, then, can be seen as his contribution to the development of alternative myths for the modern age. Similarly, the narrator of *Shame* acknowledges that an alternative to the myth of fundamentalist religion is the development of new myths. And he unabashedly recommends three such myths derived directly from the Western Enlightenment: "liberty; equality; fraternity" (S, 278).

Rushdie's contention, then, is not that we should not have faith, but that each of us should have the freedom and opportunity to explore and enact his or her own faith in his or her own way. Rushdie is an apostle of freedom, proclaiming the creed that none of us can be truly free as long as any of us remain oppressed. In this regard, it is significant that he has become more and more concerned with the oppression of women in Islamic society. After all, the male-female distinction is among the most important of the dual oppositions that Rushdie consistently attacks, and as long as women are oppressed, men cannot have true freedom either:

Repression is a seamless garment; a society which is authoritarian in its social and sexual codes, which crushes its women beneath the intolerable burdens of honour and propriety, breeds repressions of other kinds as well. Contrariwise: dictators are always—or at least in public, on other people's behalf—puritanical. So it turns out that my "male" and "female" plots are the same story, after all. (S, 189)²⁴

Rushdie clearly recognizes that the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity are myths instituted for pragmatic purposes and does not attempt to essentialize them into universal truths. Still, despite his questioning of the stable, unified subject and despite a somewhat modern (though not radical, by feminist standards) sensitivity to gender issues, his basic political vision seems to be informed by a remarkably traditional liberal humanism, garnered straight from the slogans of the French Revolution (though tempered by Rushdie's Indian viewpoint as well). All of this seems pretty unobjectionable, even clichéd, by Western standards, yet at the date of this writing Rushdie apparently remains a marked man, sentenced to death by Khomeini for the transgressions committed against Islam in *The Satanic Verses*.

Khomeini's seemingly bizarre reaction to Rushdie's latest book serves to emphasize the profoundly contextual nature of Rushdie's fiction, and of transgressive literature in general—in order to be successfully transgressive, literature must have something specific to transgress against. Rushdie's fiction, viewed narrowly within the Western tradition, is inventive and provocative, but does not appear to be especially radical or subversive. But, viewed from the Islamic perspective of Iran or Pakistan, the deconstruction of dualities and concomitant questioning of authority inherent in Rushdie's fiction are so powerfully subversive that Khomeini has declared that Rushdie must die.

Preposterous as it seems from our Western perspective, Khomeini's death sentence would apparently be in perfect accordance with Muslim law, except for the fact that the fundamentalist hermeneutics used to reach this verdict (clearly based upon techniques of reading the Koran as the univocal Word of God) are incapable of dealing with the rhetorical complexities of a text such as *The Satanic Verses*. Apparently Khomeini did not heed Rushdie's narrator's warnings against the "intentionalist fallacy," but then it is also a pretty safe bet that Khomeini never read Wimsatt and Beardsley, or (for that matter) *The Satanic Verses* itself. In any case, this attempt to literalize Barthes's death of the author in the case of Rushdie indicates that there is a quite tangible real-world relevance for both literature and literary studies. This relevance, in fact, is one of the prime points made by Rushdie's fiction, even without the Ayatollah's "help." In fact, Rushdie sees the very notion that literature might be divorced from real-world political issues as an illusion arising from the comforts of advanced Western societies:

In the rich, powerful societies of the West, it is possible to exclude politics from fiction; to treat public affairs as peripheral and faintly disreputable. From outside the West, this looks like the sort of position one can only take up inside a cocoon of privilege.²⁵

Rushdie's encounter with Khomeini highlights in a particularly graphic (and frightening) way the interrelatedness of literature and politics outside that Western cocoon of privilege. Rushdie has declined to seek the safety of that cocoon, and one can only hope that his courageous literary attacks on the real-world despotism of regimes such as Khomeini's has not placed him in the position that George Miranda of *The Satanic Verses* sees Gibreel's last contro-

versial religious movie as having placed Gibreel: "Looks like he's trying deliberately to set up a final confrontation with religious sectarians, knowing he can't win, that he'll be broken into bits" (SV, 539).

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¹ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (New York: Avon, 1982), 167. Henceforth referenced parenthetically in the text as MC with page number.

² Mario Couto, "Midnight's Children and Parents," *Encounter* 58 (1982): 62.

³ For a brief review of some of the parallels between *Midnight's Children* and *Tristram Shandy*, see Keith Wilson, "Midnight's Children and Reader Responsibility," *Critical Quarterly* 26 (1984): 34. The most important parallel that Wilson does not list concerns the theme of questionable parentage that permeates both books.

⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 267. Henceforth referenced parenthetically in the text as S with page number.

⁵ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Viking, 1989), 426. Henceforth referenced parenthetically in the text as SV with page number.

⁶ John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (New York: New American Library, 1969), 289.

⁷ An emphasis on the significance of naming is a standard feature of Rushdie's fiction. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai, himself meaningfully (if illegitimately) named, explains this emphasis as a part of his Indian heritage: "Our names contain our fates; living as we do in a place where names have not acquired the meaninglessness of the West, and are still more than mere sounds, we are also victims of our titles" (MC, 364).

⁸ The deconstruction of dualism inherent in Sinai's status as "man-dog" is further emphasized by the fact that he is referred to by his "trainers" as "buddha," which is not only Urdu for "old man," but also evokes the image of Gautama the Buddha, of whom it was characteristic to be "capable of not-living-in-the-world as well as living in it; he was present, but also absent" (MC, 418).

⁹ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), 112.

¹⁰ Bakhtin (note 9) 115.

¹¹ In *Shame* Rushdie emphasizes the many changes that can occur in the course of a life through the repeated use of the motif, "Life is long."

¹² Obviously, such challenges to this traditional notion of the self are by now not exactly news. However, the political force of Rushdie's challenge and the way in which it places the multiplicity of the self within the context of the multiplicity of Indian culture give his challenge a special vitality.

¹³ Saladin Chamcha's name is itself an oxymoronic dual opposition with strong political connotations. "Saladin" refers to the great Egyptian Muslim sultan and warrior who successfully opposed the imperialism of the Crusaders in the twelfth century. "Chamcha," on the other hand, is literally Urdu for "spoon," but also has a second meaning with important resonances concerning Saladin's Anglophilia. "Colloquially, a *chamcha* is a person who sucks up to powerful people, a yes-man, a sycophant. The British Empire would not have lasted a week without such collaborators among its colonized people." Salman Rushdie, "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance," *London Times* (July 3, 1982): 8. Rushdie also notes this idiomatic meaning of "chamcha" in *Midnight's Children* (MC, 467).

¹⁴ This episode has a particular political charge for Islamic fundamentalists because it grows out of actual accounts in Arabic history, accounts that have been rejected by later commentators on the Koran as apocryphal.

¹⁵ Calling Muhammad “Mahound” has apparently also been a major source of the violent reactions of Islamic fundamentalists to Rushdie’s book. A. G. Mojtabai indicates that this naming is shocking indeed to Muslims, but notes that the name is to be attributed to Gibreel (who is either insane or at least highly unstable), not to Rushdie himself. “Magical Mystery Pilgrimage,” *New York Times Book Review* (January 29, 1989): 3. Actually, the narration of *The Satanic Verses* is so complex that it is not even possible to attribute this usage to Gibreel in a non-problematic way, since it may also come from the narrator. Another source of offense at Rushdie’s text involves the repeated suggestion that Mahound was primarily a businessman, for whom the prophet-motive was decidedly pun-like. Note, finally, that Saleem Sinai also mentions Mahound as a common alternative appellation for Muhammad (MC, 192).

¹⁶ The episode of Mahound and Salman appears to have been derived both from historical accounts and from the treatment of the same story contained in Italo Calvino, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 182–83.

¹⁷ Salman Rushdie, “The Book Burning,” *New York Review of Books* (March 2, 1989): 26.

¹⁸ *The Satanic Verses* itself is filled with such chillingly prophetic passages, such as this description of the sacrifice of the artist: “the writer agrees to the ruination of his life, and gains (but only if he’s lucky) maybe not eternity, but posterity, at least” (SV, 459).

¹⁹ These similarities are clearly not entirely coincidental. Rushdie shows a familiarity with the philosophy of Nietzsche through scattered allusions in his work. For example, Mirza Saeed Akhtar in *The Satanic Verses* experiences apocalyptic nightmares after having read Nietzsche the night before (SV, 216).

²⁰ For an extensive discussion of the parallels between *Midnight’s Children* and Grass’s *The Tin Drum*, see Rudolf Bader, “Indian Tin Drum,” *International Fiction Review* 11 (1984): 75–83. Also note that Wilson (note 3) compares *Midnight’s Children* to Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, a work very much in this same tradition, 35.

²¹ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1980). Further references will appear in the text.

²² Note Rushdie’s own contention (note 17) that “*The Satanic Verses* is not, in my view, an antireligious novel” (26).

²³ Rushdie (note 17), 26.

²⁴ Rushdie (note 17) conjectures that his attempts to deal with the treatment of women in Islamic society and in the Koran constitute a major reason for the violent reaction to *The Satanic Verses* (26).

²⁵ Rushdie (note 13), 8.